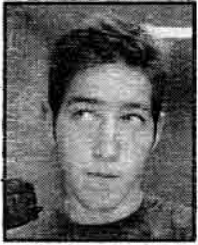


Wet Cold American Soccer

by Chris Ladd
A&E EDITOR

At my old high school, everyone who was anyone played soccer. They played soccer in the morning,



WHERE THE
HELL IS
WAYNE,
MAINE?

soccer in the evening, soccer on the kitchen table, soccer all the time. When snow inevitably fell, they donned Pumas and played indoors, safe from the cold and wet. I generally avoided the sorts of things most people did in high

school; needless to say, I avoided soccer like the plague. Going for that least-populated niche, I ran cross-country all through middle school. Man, was that ever stupid. At least with other sports there was a complex goal, a sophisticated purpose to strive for. The point of cross-country was to run until you got there. I came to my senses and played golf throughout the remainder of my sadder but wiser days. Golf is just like cross-country, but slower paced. You walk leisurely until you get there, pausing occasionally to seek out the ball you shanked into the tall grass. Golf treated me well.

This is why I felt a tinge of apprehension when a friend of mine called me up last week.

She was starting some sort of "intramural" soccer team. She wondered if I might like to play. I pretended she had a wrong number. She's much smarter than me though, and she didn't buy it. Eventually, as she tends to do, she succeeded in cajoling me onto the alternates list. Games were Sundays, starting this Sunday, in fact, and she hoped she'd see me there.

At this point, I have to play soccer. If you just joined in this paragraph, I hadn't played soccer in over seven years, so naturally I set all my creative energies in motion to tackle this formidable problem. I have two friends in particular that are excellent soccer players: one was stalked by the Skidmore men's soccer coach (no kid-

ding, he really was), and the other played on a touring British UeberGood team. They both play soccer very well, but I didn't go to either. I didn't practice soccer, I didn't read up on technique, and I didn't go run around a soccer field for endurance. I set my mind to work, instead, on how to weasel out of this engagement I'd gotten myself into. I schemed and plotted, connived and hijinxed, and I came up with only one scenario that would allow me to wriggle myself out of this soccer business, if only for one day. I would make it rain. After some research, I discovered the only truly reliable, time-tested method to induce rain artificially was prayer. Naturally, I spent the next two

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nights in Wilson Chapel, head bowed and eyes closed, visualizing heavy clouds and tiny raindrops.

Sunday came around and I awoke to the pitter patter and drum of heavy raindrops pounding the roof above me. Well, I would have if I didn't live in the basement; I didn't really hear anything. It rained anyhow, and it rained hard. Great gobs of water spilled awkwardly earthward as I watched with glee from the safety of one of Skidmore's many covered paths. Surely they couldn't play soccer in this mess, in this crazed downpour. Small lakes and ponds formed in every unsheltered space. I left the covered path for a split second to skip under the lip of the D-hall and found my back splotched with frisbee sized patches of wetness. Surely we couldn't be playing.

Just to be sure, though, I drove down to the field. Even with wipers in a frenzy the heavy rain left my windshield so blurry it was hard to see cars

in front of me, and impossible to see those behind. I circled a few times, watching the wet forms in the center of the field, and hoping to God they were coming to their senses and discussing what sort of indoor activity might be prudent in a deluge such as this. They didn't budge, however, so I decided to be a sport, brave the rain, and go help them decide on an indoor activity.

Loud crashes of thunder clapped and ripped through my ears as I ran on to the field; someone on my 'team' shouted over the din that the "lightning was moving away," but the last part of his sentence was cut off by another deafening roar from the heavens. Within seconds I was drenched.

We stood around, waiting for three members of the other team who had wisely failed to arrive. We got wetter. After we'd gotten wetter still, we won the game by default. The mysterious three weren't coming and, in celebration, we decided to play anyway.

Now, I'm a stickler for literary form, and they say that in columns such as these you should save your big surprises for paragraph eight. Here's my surprise: I am really good at soccer. Really.

As the rain dribbled off my nose and chin, I watched my more experienced teammates go to work. It was all coming back, the cold September mornings, the sweaty shin-guards, the Tupperware crates of orange slices Nick Connell's mom always brought for halftime. I never used to eat those; I would stick the slices in my mouth so they covered my teeth, and make goofy faces with Adam Matson, my next-door neighbor. Then, I'd suck out the juice like Bunnacula and

throw the empty carcasses in the waste bin quickly, so no one would know I'd left the meaty pulp behind. Memories.

I started running up and down the field, and it all became suddenly do-able. I got the ball once; someone slide-tackled me and he pulled me down with him onto the ground, into the soggy mush that existed where once a soccer field sat. The ball cruised out of bounds, but I was taking notes. "Slide-tackle," I noted. The next time someone near me got the ball, I ran, slid, and kept sliding. "Slide-tackle in front of your opponent," I amended. The wet grass felt good, though, and it was great fun getting covered in mud and grass and filth.

In total, I think I counted a header, one successful slide tackle, one ball-kicked wide on an open net, and one assist before I had to leave, soaking and soiling my car's driver seat with my wet dirty clothes. I drove to Case and slogged to an afternoon meeting sopping, hoping very much that someone would ask why I was so wet and dirty and then getting disappointed that they didn't. I told them anyway of course; I had been playing soccer, and it would do them well to get some exercise sometime as well. I guess I didn't have to be that snippy, but I was let down that they hadn't asked, and my soaked apparel was getting chilly. It was another three hours before I changed out of those soggy clothes; I stepped into a column of warm water fully dressed, and then slowly removed and laundered all my things, even the shoes, laying them out to dry on the towel rack. I hung a few items over the shower door.

My wallet absorbed the wetness like a sponge, and I pulled a handful of wet bills out and hung them up to dry on the television cable suspended from my ceiling. I ached for days afterward and limped to the D-hall on sore legs, but it was nice. It was a constant reminder that after a seven-year hiatus, I was reunited with soccer. Also, the ache and pain bid me never, ever, under any circumstances do that to myself again, ever. We have a game next Sunday. I guess we'll see. ●